The Feminine Mystique in Dental Education: A Feminist's Challenge

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I am going to engage in a polemic—a controversial disputation. I know that is what I am doing and I want you to know that I know. I will not speak to specific strategies or tactics to recruit, retain, and advance women in dental education. Rather, my comments will be more conceptual. My tone will strike passion, for I feel strongly about this issue. I may not be as substantive as either you or I would like, but I will be expressing my personally reflected views on this vitally important topic. My goal is two-fold: first, to express one dental educator's perspective on a problem in dental education, and secondly, to motivate other dental educators to pursue, in substantive and tangible ways, redressing that problem.

Being a Feminist

I am a feminist and am here today to challenge the feminine mystique in dental education. In 1963 Betty Friedan sparked a major revolution in our society with her publication of *The Feminine Mystique.* A "mystique" is a complex of beliefs and/or attitudes around an idea having a meaning or reality that is neither apparent to the senses nor obvious to the intellect. Ms. Friedan argued in her book, to me persuasively, that mystical beliefs of the feminine have overwhelmed our society. The feminine mystique says the root of women's problems is that women envy men and try to be like men rather than accept their own nature, their femininity; which can find fulfillment only in sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing maternal love. The book, as a disclosure of the real nature of femininity, became a vision for women in much the same way Martin Luther King's "I Have A Dream" speech became a vision for Afro-Americans. With Ms. Friedan's leadership, the movement was galvanized by the founding, in 1966 of the National Organization for Women (NOW). NOW was established with a declared goal of moving to true equality for all women in America and an equal partnership of the sexes. The movement to liberate women in this country from the feminine mystique began. I am a feminist and a member of the National Organization for Women. Note that is not "of" but "for" women. I proudly wear my tee-shirt that proclaims, "a man of quality is not threatened by women for equality."

To me, to be a feminist is to assert:

- Women and men are equal in value.
- Women and men are equal in dignity.
- Women and men are equal in respect.
- Women and men are equal in potential.
- Women and men are equal in rights.
- Women and men are equal in freedom.
- Women and men are equal in autonomy.
- Women and men ought to be equal in opportunity.
- Women and men ought to be equal in responsibility.
- Women and men ought to be equal in obligations.
- Women and men ought to be equal in power.

To be a feminist is to believe that every political ideology, every social structure, every religious faith, every organizational configuration, every cultural assumption, every government bureaucracy, and every policy, practice, and procedure must support the notion of the radical equality of women and men, the full humanism of both sexes.

To be a feminist is to fully support and endorse the unique, influential, important, demanding, and essential role of women in society.
To be a feminist is to actively engage oneself in tangible ways in helping women to be all they can be and all they want to be.

To be a feminist is to reject all sexism.

I am a feminist and I reject the feminist mystique in society, in dentistry, and in dental education.

What is the feminist mystique in dentistry? While dentistry is a male profession, there is the belief that women are no longer, cannot be, and should not be equal partners with men in the profession; that women in the profession are an interesting phenomenon, but are only incidental; that women are not essential to the maintaining of the profession; that the important, influential, and valuable work of the profession is, and must be, accomplished by men.

Women’s role is secondary, supportive, and subordinate. Acceptance of these mythical notions, whether apparent to the senses or real to the intellect, contributes to what is a major problem in dental education; a lack of appropriate numbers of women faculty to balance the male contributions in education and research, and a lack of adequate numbers of female members to serve as role models for growing numbers of women student dentists.

The Value of the Androgynous

I believe that women and men are different, in fact. I know they are: I applaud the differences! Each sex has its essential qualities and strengths to offer to society and our institutions. Dentistry and dental education require the balance of the two parts. Those of us with the ideal, a balancing of men and women in leadership roles in our colleges is a problem, not an issue. The most consistent metaphor of the “glass ceiling” has been widely utilized to describe the hidden, barriers to advancement to upper administration positions in organizations. Evidence has shown that movement of female faculty would help women gain credentials to enter academic, and possibly we will catch up. I am not optimistic.

Women in Dentistry

In 1961, 19% of our total student dentist population of 22,000 were women. Today 35% of our current first year class is 38% women, an increase of 13% in just twenty years. Today our graduates were 50%, women. As I stated earlier, I believe in the imperative of a balancing of men and women – failure to acknowledge the value of the role of women in leadership, and failure to affirm those ideals, are part of the feminist mystique. I reject and encourage you to reject this mystique!

Rollo May states it directly in his recent book, The Courage to Be: “The great reformer, virtuously proclaiming women’s liberation. A reformer, like the merits of women’s rights and feminism, finds that the feminine mystique is an unconscious compulsion for the “control” and “power” over women. I am a feminist because I believe that the feminist movement’s efforts to transform women into autonomous, responsible decision makers is ultimately beneficial for men, for men. Such will make male liberation possible. Rolls may states it directly in his recent book. The Courage to Be: ‘If we can withhold liberation from women, no man can withhold liberation from himself.” Men should insist that women gain credentials to enter academic, and female students, ratios among faculty are lagging far behind. Perhaps we are only observing a delayed response that is due to women gaining credentials to enter academic, and possibly we will catch up. I am not optimistic.

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Affirming an androgynous college leads to a commitment to leveling the playing field for women in an intense and passionate interest and concern for recruiting, retaining, and advancing women in dental education; and taking affirmative action as an equal opportunity employer. We are members of universities that are “equal opportunity employers.” Federal law supports and upholds the sexual equality. However, there is a gap between the reality and the gap. I hope I am wrong, but my observations lead me to conclude that the feminine mystique is alive and well in the clinics and classrooms of our colleges.

Taking Affirmative Action

Affirming an androgynous college leads to a commitment to leveling the playing field for women in an intense and passionate interest and concern for recruiting, retaining, and advancing women in dental education; and taking affirmative action as an equal opportunity employer. We are members of universities that are “equal opportunity employers.” Federal law supports and upholds the sexual equality. However, there is a gap between the reality and the gap. I hope I am wrong, but my observations lead me to conclude that the feminine mystique is alive and well in the clinics and classrooms of our colleges.

Taking affirmative action is a problem. Inadequate leadership roles in our colleges is a problem. Failure to acknowledge the imperative of a balancing of men and women – failure to acknowledge the value of the role of women in leadership, and failure to affirm those ideals, are part of the feminist mystique. I reject and encourage you to reject this mystique!

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today with regard to the sexes, considering the systematic inequalities perpetuated against women for generations, yes, even centuries! Rawls explained his concept of distributive justice by arguing that social and economic inequities are to be arranged so that they are both reasonable and expected to be to everyone's advantage and attached to positions and offices open to all. What does "justice as fairness," to use Rawls's terms, require today in order to create a level playing field for women?

I remember the basketball teams for which I was chosen always had an extra player to compensate for me.

I strongly believe that to resolve the problem I have identified, inadequate numbers of women faculty, members and administrators to balance our male-oriented approaches, and to serve as effective role models for our female students, that we must take aggressive and affirmative action! While our university publicly proclaims their allegiance to the concept, all too often in academic dentistry I see allegiance to the concept, all too often in academic dentistry I see tribalism and comfortable and confident male-oriented men to join hands and work together to effect a change.

What does "justice as fairness," to use Rawls' terms, require today in order to create a level playing field for women?

I would challenge men today who are self-assured in their masculinity and confident in their performance, the truly androgynous man to join hands and work together to effect a change. Only when women are acknowledged, affirmed, and valued for the contribution that they, and only they can make in dentistry and dental education, then, and only then, will those inequities begin to be destroyed and men and women be able to join hands and hearts in proclaiming the strength, beauty, and potential of our chosen profession.

Conclusion

What must be done? Generally three things:

1. We must alter the assumptions and values of faculty, primarily men, however, I must acknowledge that I have observed women faculty especially in the field of humanities, that have actually been of a different, more flexible, more compassionate and less adversarial atti

due to those factors, we do not need to adjust our practices to accommodate those differences.

2. We must treat women preferentially, out of a sense of fair play, leveling the playing field; a choosing up of sides so the game will be fair.

3. We must select, appoint, elect, and establish leaders in dental education (men and women) in their attitudes and by their deeds, testify to their enthusiasm and unselfish support of women in dentistry and dental education.

Such is not an easy task and affirmative action, modes of affirmative action will be the policies and procedures will be implemented. Women dentists; that we must take aggressive approaches, and to serve as effective role models for our female students, in their attitudes and by their deeds, testify to their enthusiasm and unselfish support of women in dentistry and dental education.

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References